



THE PRAIRIE SCHOOL

August 22, 2016

Dear Seniors and Parents,

Now that your college application process is about to begin in earnest, we want to provide the following information as you and we get going. This letter is not meant to be exhaustive—we'll provide plenty more information and counsel as the year unfolds. Rather, it's intended to highlight up front the most important aspects of the application process. We know this letter is long, but abbreviating it would mean omitting crucial information, so please hang in there and read it all!

Final College Lists

By late September, we will ask you to give us a final (or nearly final) list of colleges to which you're applying. If you want help making those choices, please come see us. On average, Prairie students apply to about six colleges but you need to decide what number is right for you. Our only condition is that you include two safety schools that, like your other colleges, you would be happy to call "home."

Testing Information

Unless you have confirmed with us that you are finished testing, please plan to take or retake the ACT and/or SAT this fall, preferably in September or October. While a few colleges require one or the other test, the vast majority will happily accept either one. Therefore, if you took both tests in the spring, feel free to retake only the stronger of the two. Not sure how your SAT and ACT scores compare to each other? Please see us for advice on which test you should pursue.

If you haven't already taken either test **with Writing**, we recommend you do so in case you apply to one or more colleges that require the Writing portion. Many do.

While some colleges want all your score reports from either the ACT or SAT, others require only your best score report (highest composite from a single test date). In the latter case you may nevertheless want to send more than one report if your highest sub-scores are from different test dates. The good news is that whether you send multiple score reports per colleges' requirements or by your own choice, colleges will use your best scores. In any case, please see us for advice on which score reports you should send to your colleges.

To further complicate (and help) matters, some colleges are "test optional" or "test flexible," meaning you either don't have to submit any test scores or you must do so only under certain circumstances. For students who don't test well, this can be an advantage. However, some test-optional or test-flexible colleges use test scores for certain admissions tracks (direct application to

the engineering school within a university, for example) or for post-admission purposes (awarding merit-based aid, for example). If you're applying to a test-optional or test-flexible college, be sure to peruse their web site as well as ask them directly if and when they require or use test scores.

If you have taken or will take **SAT Subject Tests**, please see us before sending score reports to colleges. It's important that you choose those reports prudently to strengthen, rather than inadvertently harm, your applications.

Check each school's website to determine which standardized tests it requires (ACT, SAT, and/or SAT Subject Tests) and whether you may submit your choice of score reports or must report all scores from either test. Do **not** rely on test requirement information in Naviance or other college guides. Trust only each college's own instructions.

You must order your score reports for colleges online directly from ACT and/or College Board (SAT). Although our office can send test scores to colleges in an emergency, they will not accept our copies as official reports for their admissions process. **Make sure you order score reports at least three weeks before your colleges' admission deadlines.**

Test registration deadlines are passing as we speak, so **register now!** You can find ACT and SAT test dates and registration deadlines on the attached flyer as well as at act.org and collegeboard.org, respectively.

The Common Application vs. College-specific Applications

The Common Application is a comprehensive, generic application form that hundreds of colleges use. It is available at www.commonapp.org along with a list of colleges that accept it.

Non-Common App colleges require their own application forms, and some colleges allow you to choose between the Common App and their own application form. When in doubt about which application you should use, please see us.

Application Deadlines

You are responsible for knowing your colleges' application plans and deadlines and for clearly communicating those deadlines to our assistant, Mrs. Uebe. We require you to print each college's website page that indicates the plan and deadline you're using, and include it with the "College Application Details" form you submit to us (more on this below). Colleges' admission deadlines are firm, so you need to meet them to ensure full consideration. Specific programs and scholarship opportunities may have different and often earlier deadlines, so read all the fine print in any college's admission requirements.

If you are applying to **Madison**, please note: Beginning this year, you may choose between the UW System Application and the Common Application. Madison has also changed its application plan to include Early Action and Regular Decision. If you are applying to Madison, be sure to carefully review their new admission policies, deadlines, and requirements. (Other UW branches will continue to use the UW System Application and offer rolling plans with deadlines that vary from branch to branch.)

Many selective schools with a Regular Decision plan also offer **Early Decision and/or Early Action** options. These plans are great **for students with high interest** in such a college. The “Early” title, however, has become somewhat of a misnomer because some colleges now offer early (usually Nov./Dec.) and late (usually Jan./Feb.) Early Action or Early Decision options, called EA I/EA II and ED I/ED II, in order to give students more time to consider their level of interest and to make a later “early plan” application if not admitted under a previous one. You may assume a college that offers EA I/II and/or ED I/II will guarantee equal consideration for their early and late options.

Early Decision (ED): If you’re considering an ED application, please clearly understand that it is a **binding contract** in which you promise the college that, if admitted, you **will enroll and withdraw all applications to other schools**. ED applicants must also submit early financial aid information to receive an estimated award with the admission decision. (An insufficient financial aid package is the only reason a student may be released from an ED contract, but that situation is extremely rare so do not see it as an easy loophole.) Obviously, you would apply ED only if that college is your absolute first choice. If it is, then we recommend you use the ED option because that gesture of highest interest typically increases your chance of admission.

Early Action (EA): This is another plan by which you can express high interest in a college and get a relatively quick admission decision, but it does **not** obligate you to enroll. As with ED, applying EA is likely to improve your chance of admission.

For each of your colleges, you must complete our “College Application Details” form and submit it to our office at least four (4) weeks before that college’s deadline. Please note: You do **not** need to have finished your part of the college application before you fill out our form. You just need to know you’re going to apply to that college. We will have over 400 applications to process this year, so our 4-week lead time is essential to the smooth operation of our office and timely submission of your school materials. We’ll explain our forms and system at the first Senior Briefing for students in September and at our **College Meeting for Senior Parents on Thursday, August 25. This is a critically important meeting; please plan to attend!**

Please be aware that we process and submit applications by college deadlines, not by date of receipt in our office. If you want us to mail specific materials well ahead of a deadline for particular reasons, please notify Mrs. Uebe and we will do our best to satisfy your request.

If you have questions about the nuts and bolts of this process, please contact Mrs. Uebe. She is highly experienced and manages the flow of paperwork in and out of our office.

Recommendations

Each recommendation we write is a completely individualized School Letter that profiles in detail the student’s academic and extracurricular activities and accomplishments, as well as personality and character. Our comments are based on our own observations, those of other faculty and staff, and information the student provide in various forms. Our goal is to provide admissions offices with a multi-dimensional portrait of each student and to offer information relevant to their candidacy. Parents, please contact us if you have important information we should consider adding to our recommendation for your student.

Many colleges and universities also require one or two recommendations from teachers in **academic subjects** (English, history, math, science, or world language). If you're planning to major in the performing or visual arts, one of your teacher recommendations may come from an arts teacher. Additionally, you need to choose teachers who meet three criteria: They have taught you in your **junior or senior year**, they are in different academic disciplines, and they know you well and can write strong letters. (Note: The best candidates are not necessarily the teachers who gave you the highest grades, but rather those who know you the best as a student.)

Even if a college or university does not require a teacher's recommendation, it can be wise to send at least one anyway, **unless** the application instructions specifically ask you to not send additional materials.

Most recommendation forms include an option for you to waive your right to see the recommendation. Please **check "Yes" to waive your right**. If you don't waive it, the recommendation loses credibility in the eyes of admissions officers because they can't be sure the writer was free to be candid. Don't worry, though; Prairie teachers wouldn't consent to write for you if they couldn't be positive!

Résumés

By now, you should have drafted a list of your extracurricular activities in some form that includes relevant details, hours per week and weeks per year, and the years (gr. 9-12) you participated. If you do this carefully and thoroughly, it'll give you a "cheat sheet" for easy transcription into college applications. In early September we will ask you for a copy of that list for our reference as well.

College Essays

Last spring we held a class on what makes a good college essay, offered three college essay workshops this summer, and will continue working with you on developing your essays this fall. You may have one essay you can adapt to a number of college essay prompts, but you may also have to write multiple essays and/or short responses. **We urge you to give us drafts of any writing you're including in your applications** so we can provide feedback for you to use in revising repeatedly until you've done your best work. Throughout the application season, we will gladly read and comment on any essay and short response drafts you have, but please do not wait until the last minute to seek our feedback. We need time to review your writing and you need time to revise.

Proofreading Applications

Never submit a college application that you, your parents, and/or other trusted adults have not carefully proofread. **Hint #1: Reading aloud** is far more effective for catching errors! **Hint #2: Proofread every bit of your application**; errors often appear in such simple things as names and addresses. We will gladly review your applications before you submit them if you feel less confident about your own proofreading. Again, plan ahead and leave time for this critical step before your college deadlines.

Financial Aid

All colleges require the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) from families applying for **need-based** financial aid. You'll need to complete the FAFSA online at www.fafsa.ed.gov (be sure to use the **.gov** site). The FAFSA will be posted on **October 1**, so you cannot complete it before then, but we strongly advise you to complete it **as soon as possible after October 1**. Submitting the FAFSA early improves your chances of receiving financial aid.

Be aware that in addition to the FAFSA, some colleges require their own financial aid forms with their own deadlines, and/or the College Scholarship Service (CSS) PROFILE (available at profileonline.collegeboard.org). If your colleges require the PROFILE, carefully read the PROFILE's own instructions and deadlines, but check your colleges' financial aid information as well because they may have their own deadlines for it.

On the evening of **Tuesday, September 13**, Prairie will host a **Financial Aid Seminar** conducted by Susan Teerink, Marquette University's Director of Financial Aid. She is masterful at making the complexities of financial aid intelligible, and you'll have ample opportunity to ask questions. More information about this and all other college counseling programs is attached to this letter and available in the Weekly.

Applying for Scholarships

Fall and winter of senior year is the best time to find and apply for college scholarships. If you wish to compete for merit-based scholarships, you'll need to hustle to find them. The process is highly individualized and scholarship sources are many, so this will take some work. We'll do all we can to assist in your efforts, but here are some tips to get you started:

Some good sources of merit-based aid (scholarships for academic performance, special talents, etc.) are:

- Colleges and universities—these are the richest sources of merit-based aid (although the most selective colleges typically don't offer much or any merit aid)
- Parents' employers and other businesses
- Local organizations (Kiwanis Club, Rotary Club, Lions Club, Junior League, etc.)
- Places of worship
- National organizations

Good scholarship search engines include, among others, findaid.org, fastweb.com, and collegeboard.org. You should check directly with colleges that interest you to learn more about their own scholarship opportunities. Information often is available on their websites but many universities do not advertise all their available scholarships, so you need to seek that information proactively by calling your colleges' admission and/or financial aid offices.

We also post many independent scholarship opportunities on a document shared with the students in Google Drive.

That's All!

As always, call, email, or come see us with questions, concerns, confusions, and everything else the sometimes complicated, always detailed college application process generates. You're not alone! We're here to help in any way we can.

Warm regards,

Maggie McDonough and Jim Zielinski
Co-Directors of College Counseling

Attachments (2)

ACT & SAT National Test Dates and Registration Deadlines
College Counseling Programs flyer

 THE PRAIRIE SCHOOL

**College Counseling Family Programs
2016-2017**

Gr 12: College Meeting for Senior Parents

Thursday, August 25, 7:00-8:30 p.m. in the Theatre

- Application deadlines are rapidly approaching. Please join us for a detailed overview of the college application process.
- We encourage Grade 12 parents to consider this mandatory.

Gr 9-12: College Financial Aid Seminar

Tuesday, September 13, 7:00-8:30 p.m. in the Theatre

- Hear from an expert in financial aid about how aid works and how you can prepare for college expenses.
- The FAFSA timeline has changed this year; learn all of the updates.
- All Upper School parents and interested students are encouraged to attend.

Gr 9-12: Mock Admissions Case Studies – *NEW EVENT!*

Tuesday, October 18, 7:00-8:30 p.m. in the Theatre

- You've heard rumors about how colleges evaluate applicants and what matters most to them. Here's your chance to learn just how complicated it really is!
- Go behind the scenes and review sample applications to make admissions decisions with seasoned admissions officers from leading institutions across the country.
- Grade 11-12 families should consider this mandatory. Grade 9-10 families are also welcome.

Gr 9-11: College Meeting for Junior Parents

Thursday, January 12, 7:00-8:30 p.m. in the Theatre

- Your student's college search is getting underway! Join us for a thorough overview of the college search process.
- We encourage Grade 11 parents to consider this mandatory. Grade 9-10 parents are also welcome.

Gr 9-10: Informational Evening for Freshman and Sophomore Parents – *NEW EVENT!*

Tuesday, February 21, 7:00-8:00 p.m. in the SRC

- Wondering what you and your student should be doing and when? Bring your questions, meet the college counselors, and learn more about our 4-year college counseling process.

Gr 9-11: Prairie College Fair – *NEW EVENT!*

Thursday, March 16, 12:00-2:00 p.m. in the Fieldhouse

- Students and parents are encouraged to visit with representatives from a wide range of colleges. Explore options and opportunities, collect information, and ask individualized questions as you begin or continue your college search process.

ACT & SAT National Test Dates and Registration Deadlines 2016-2017

Students must register for the ACT and SAT on their own through ACT and College Board, respectively. The ACT and SAT are administered at various locations in southeastern Wisconsin and northern Illinois. Further information regarding registration is available at the websites below.

We strongly recommend that students **not** send test results to colleges until the fall of senior year.

ACT Test Dates

Website: www.act.org

~~~~~ *Students SHOULD register for the optional Writing test.* ~~~~~

| Test Date          | Regular Registration<br>Postmark Deadline | Late Registration<br>Postmark Deadline<br>(additional fee applies) |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| September 10, 2016 | August 5, 2016                            | August 19, 2016                                                    |
| October 22, 2016   | September 16, 2016                        | September 30, 2016                                                 |
| December 10, 2016  | November 4, 2016                          | November 18, 2016                                                  |
| February 11, 2017  | January 13, 2017                          | January 20, 2017                                                   |
| April 8, 2017      | March 3, 2017                             | March 17, 2017                                                     |
| June 10, 2017      | May 5, 2017                               | May 19, 2017                                                       |

### SAT Test Dates

Website: [www.collegeboard.org](http://www.collegeboard.org)

| Test Date        | Test                | Regular Registration<br>Postmark Deadline | Late Registration<br>Online or by Phone<br>(additional fee applies) |
|------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| October 1, 2016  | SAT & Subject Tests | September 1, 2016                         | September 20, 2016                                                  |
| November 5, 2016 | SAT & Subject Tests | October 7, 2016                           | October 25, 2016                                                    |
| December 3, 2016 | SAT & Subject Tests | November 3, 2016                          | November 22, 2016                                                   |
| January 21, 2017 | SAT & Subject Tests | December 21, 2016                         | January 10, 2017                                                    |
| March 11, 2017   | SAT Only            | February 10, 2017                         | February 28, 2017                                                   |
| May 6, 2017      | SAT & Subject Tests | April 7, 2017                             | April 25, 2017                                                      |
| June 3, 2017     | SAT & Subject Tests | May 9, 2017                               | May 24, 2017                                                        |

*Not all subject tests are available on each date.  
Refer to College Board's website for more details.*